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# Teacher Collaboration Experiences: Finding the Extraordinary in the Everyday Moments

William A. Parnell

*Portland State University*, [parnellw@pdx.edu](mailto:parnellw@pdx.edu)

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# Teacher Collaboration Experiences: Finding the Extraordinary in the Everyday Moments

**Will Parnell**

Portland State University

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## Abstract

In this report of a phenomenological study, the co-director of a U.S. early childhood program describes and reflects on the interrelationship of his collaborative work with teachers, staff members' documentation of children's work and school events, and his own professional development activities. The author presents and discusses three events that took place over the course of a year. In the first narrative episode, his recent professional development experience at a program inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach enables him to support a teacher who is feeling discouraged about challenging situations in her classroom. Together they plan an after-school event that engages families in reorganizing parts of the classroom. The second narrative episode centers on the author's documentation of a complex construction made by two children in a new space that was created by the reorganization efforts. The final narrative episode consists primarily of a reflective conversation among the author, the teacher, and two colleagues, during which documentation panels created by the author and the teacher are the basis for collaborative discussion about the events of the preceding two narratives. Each narrative is followed by a discussion and brief analysis. The paper concludes with reflections on resulting insights about collaboration, documentation, and professional development.

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## Background

The phenomenological study discussed in this article took place at a university-sponsored, full-day early childhood lab school program in Portland, Oregon, USA. The author and participant-researcher is a co-director of the program. The other educator-protagonists include Marsha, an experienced teacher of 3- to 5-year-olds, Suzy, the program's studio teacher, and Sheryl, another researcher who was involved in a related project.

The report begins with an excerpt of a retrospective, collaborative, reflective dialogue involving Marsha, the author, Suzy, and Sheryl. This conversation occurred a year after the series of events that will form the body of this report. Marsha discusses classroom situations that had come to a head a year previously. One parent had expressed concern that her 5-year-old child was upset about two classmates reportedly saying that they did not like her because her hair was "frizzy" and she was "ugly." Another parent who had been with Marsha's class for two years was frustrated with Marsha's co-teacher's communication style. Other parents were seeking to become more involved in the classroom, and Marsha found their complaints "daunting to her spirits."

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*Marsha:* I remember this parent that had just been unhappy for two years, and I had

this other one whose child said all this stuff about others not liking her because of the way she looks, and then later the child denies this happened as we try to bring the hurt out in the open.... We could never really figure out who really said what from that trio of children, although we tried to mediate the situation with parents and the children. I would just live this dread every day, and...try to figure it out. It was amazing and difficult.

*Will:* These events really felt like there was psychic damage there for you, Marsha.

*Marsha:* Yes, that's hard. What could I do?

Marsha and I, the educator-protagonists, work at the Helen Gordon Child Development Center (HG CDC) at Portland State University. At the time of the events reported here, we had worked together for over 6 years and had each been in the field of early childhood education for more than 20 years.

HG CDC had about 17 staff members at that time. Many staff members, including Marsha and I, had visited programs in the United States inspired by the approach to education in the municipal pre-primary and infant-toddler programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy. We had seen and heard educators from Reggio Emilia speak and share stories of their educational projects. Marsha and I were using Reggio-inspired principles and practices, and we had journeyed to Reggio together for an international study tour of their programs. However, our program had not determined which new approaches and practices the staff might incorporate from their studies of the Reggio approach.

In addition, what might be considered a small revolution was happening at HG CDC. Its epicenter was the ongoing research and collaboration between Marsha and me, aided by the other co-director, the school's new studio teacher, and five or six other teachers. Through our studies and work together, we had come to realize that what mattered most to us in our practice were our relationships with all participants in the school and the collaborative work within our school context. Some staff members were not interested in this ongoing work, and others seem to be confounded by our experimentations with new approaches.

## **Documentation and Teacher Collaboration**

Marsha and I both viewed collaboration as critical, believing that through collaboration we grow as educators and become better able to help children flourish in our community context. Our principal focus of collaboration was the documents we gathered from our experiences with children in classrooms—documentation such as our observation notes, photographs, children's drawings, and other representational work. This documentation aided us in our work with others in the community, helping us to learn more about what children and teachers were learning, to understand childhood more deeply, and to make meaning of the projects unfolding in the classrooms.

Documenting young children's experiences can help educators access the memories and trails and traces of learning and teaching. If educators capture children's thoughts, words, and work—and look carefully at these trails and traces with colleagues, parents, and the children themselves—it is possible to make learning visible and uncover possibilities for future research endeavors within the learning community.

Reflection on and analysis of the children's work and of our work with them can help us to better understand our development as teachers and learners; we learn how to teach from children and community. "Realizing the importance of building one's experience within the daily life of the school, through ongoing sharing and exchange with others, has underscored once again how essential it is for us to learn to take on responsibilities, with a constant effort to analyze and develop" (Giudici,

Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001, p. 135).

We agree that, as Carlina Rinaldi (1998) notes, “sharing documentation is in fact making visible the culture of childhood both inside and outside the school to become a participant in a true act of exchange and democracy” (p. 122). The Reggio-inspired educator collaborates with children to enhance his or her own understanding of the young child and invites others to participate in this journey. In a sense, parents, educators, and other professionals in the community take part in the making and remaking of childhood. We also believe that “documentation offers the possibility for parents to share their awareness, to value discussion and exchanges with the teachers and among their group, helping them to become aware of their role and identity as parents” (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 122). Without the parents and children, there would be no *us*—the educators.

As educators make children’s work into a visible and valued marker in time and place (Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001) through their documentation, conversations and collaborative discussions may emerge and redefine the identity of the teacher. Rodgers, Anderson, Conley, LeVasseur, and Turpin (1993) point out that an atmosphere of trust and safety must exist for collaboration to flourish. In the account by Rodgers et al. of their experience in a mentoring program, one of the authors writes, “In addition to creating a safe place to grow, I wanted to dissolve the membrane of isolation I knew new faculty operated behind. Despite an ethos of sharing at MAT, I have sometimes found that ‘sharing’ slides into advice giving, coaching, or even boasting” (p. 2). Rodgers et al. (1993) suggest that the roles of participants in collaboration should be defined as co-equal laborers working toward a common task, creating “an environment of fellow explorers where community would flourish” (p. 2). Such an intentional environment, they assert, requires equal co-participation by all concerned.

At the time of the events reported here, we had yet to create such a secure, equal, and co-participative environment at HG CDC. We had just begun seeking ways to approach educational projects from this co-participative stance, and some of our colleagues seemed to still operate within the “membrane of isolation” (Rodgers et. al., 1993, p. 2).

In a Reggio-inspired approach, every participant—new teacher, mentor teacher, parent, child—is seen as having something to add to the conversation about a subject (Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001) and as potentially developing an intersubjective understanding (Rinaldi, 2006); that is, each member of the collaborative endeavor provides a point of view—ranging from fresh perspectives and “new eyes” to years of experience. Cadwell (2003) describes her experiences with collaboration in the following way:

Perhaps, because we wanted this kind of reality, we had to “rub up against each other’s rough edges” enough and to the point that it hurt—sometimes a lot, and sometimes repeatedly—in order to begin to polish each other. There have been periods of personal suffering and tears and tension and unhappiness. Now, it is hard to remember all the scenarios that brought these emotions on. Slowly, it has dawned on us that if we wanted this truth, we would have to lose some of our personal righteousness and the need to be right. (p. 100)

Cadwell (2003) adds that listening is a key ingredient to a collaborative process and adjusting is essential; forgiveness and acceptance create strong collegial relationships. Cadwell’s ideas informed our experiences with collaboration at HG CDC in many ways. In fact, we found that *most* of the experiences recounted in this report involved some of the “polishing” that Cadwell describes.

Collegial collaboration can prove difficult but rewarding and requires reflective practice. Bullard and Bullock (2002) note that “teachers in Reggio Emilia schools view intellectual conflict as an enjoyable process, involving negotiation that leads to growth” (p. 14). If guidelines for collaboration include listening and reflection, then as conflict arises, the collaborative process can

continue successfully. Discussing their own approach to collaboration in a teacher education setting, Bullock and Bullard (2002) comment that they “encouraged students [teachers] to reflect on their conflicts (e.g., Are you listening to the voice of each member in your group?); suggested that they engage in dialogue, debate, and discourse; and trusted that they would work toward negotiated issues of concerns” (p. 14). These ideas about collaboration and reflection helped Marsha and me as we considered challenges we encountered and as we looked back a year later with our colleagues.

## Methods

### Phenomenology

“Literally, phenomenology is the study of ‘phenomena’: appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience...” (Smith, 2008; see also <http://www.phenomenologyonline.com>). It entails seeking the meaning in experiences (internal constructions) rather than seeking to understand subject matter (external constructions) as occurs in much descriptive qualitative research.

Phenomenology, according to Patton (1990), “has been referred to as a philosophy, a paradigm, a methodology, and equated with qualitative methods of research” (p. 68). Philosophers such as Sartre (1958), Heidegger (1988), and Hegel (1807/1979) paved a way for a broad view of the nature of an event. For Van Manen (1990), phenomenology is an investigation of the meaning of the lived experience. It is his vision of phenomenology that illuminates the path by which Marsha and I study how we, as two educators, make meaning of the experience of school collaboration. Phenomenological researchers, Van Manen (1990) notes, become more fully who we are and produce lived-experiences by focusing on examples that intensely stand out and are corporal or emotional (p. 66).

The research project described here grew out of the concerns described in the opening dialogue. It is phenomenological in that it seeks the emergent meaning of individuals' experiences (mine and Marsha's) in a collaboration project that included inviting the parents and children to enhance and modify specific classroom spaces as a way to create community culture. We especially wanted to consider some of Marsha's challenging encounters with the parents and children and how some rifts in those relationships might be mended through collaboration and reflecting on the documentation of our experiences. We also decided to refer to relevant issues related to communication with Marsha's co-teacher (here called Cori).

An important part of this research design was the decision by our research team (Marsha, Suzy, Sheryl, and I) to be “bold and not anonymous.” We decided early on to use our real names because we had “nothing to hide or cover up in our research endeavors.” However, the children and parents in the study, and Marsha's co-teacher, would be given pseudonyms. Parents were asked if their children could participate in the study. Children were then invited to allow us to use their work and the photos we took of them; their responses were audio recorded.

### School Context

At the time we conducted this project, HG CDC had four homerooms, serving about 100 children. The program was open 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Monday through Friday; children attended on a full-day schedule. Staff members worked 8-hour shifts with a half-hour of daily planning and preparation time. Marsha's classroom had 25 children ages 3-5 years. Her space was situated on the second floor of the historic landmark building that houses the school. The classroom was split

into three smaller spaces—a sunroom with half-doors leading to two larger side-by-side rooms. One of the side-by-side spaces, where families entered, was called the front room; most of what is described in this report occurred there. The other side-by-side space, called the back room, had windows looking down on the playground and a door leading to outside stairs to the playground.

Staging was underway for the school to undergo major expansion and renovation (for complete data, see Reinisch & Parnell, 2006). A new early childhood faculty member had just been hired by the university to work on creating more early childhood master's courses. I was about to embark on a doctoral program in which the municipal education system of Reggio Emilia would be central to my specialized study and teaching at the university. The lab school was poised to consider more deeply the experiences crackling through to the surface of our daily lives.

## **Design, Data Collection, and Analysis**

Yun (2000) comments, "Recent postmodern philosophies, such as phenomenology ... and the modern practices of the 'Reggio Emilia approach' and 'constructivist education' seem to share existential prioritization of the importance of the actual experiences" (p. 247). In this report, priority is given to Marsha's and my own lived experiences. I present three key events as *narrative episodes*. These detailed portrayals of experiences have been created, or re-created, from field observations, field notes, professional journal entries, photographs, and audio recordings and transcriptions of conversations and collaboration sessions. Each narrative episode is followed by a discussion with some analysis.

As a researcher-participant, I chose to observe and take notes to capture the phenomena as they occurred. Marsha's documentation panels provided a kind of distillation of the children's work and of her and my observations, notes, and photos of the events. Subsequently, the research team (Marsha, me, the studio teacher Suzy, and fellow researcher Sheryl) revisited the data, reviewing, discussing, reflecting on, and analyzing it collaboratively to make new meaning of our experiences. Our collaborative examination enabled us to define the "incidental and essential themes" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 106) for discussion and analysis at the final collaboration session during which we reflected back across our experiences. Phenomenological themes, according to Van Manen (1990), "are not objects or generalizations; metaphorically speaking they are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes" (p. 90). We distilled the data during the collaboration session. The major question that emerged was "What meaning can we as educators find in an experience of classroom collaboration in which parents, children, and teachers intentionally remake classroom spaces into places for children?" The knots in the web (the distilled episodes) became what most impacted our understanding.

## **The Experiences: Narratives and Meaning Making**

Three narrative episodes describing poignant or otherwise significant experiences are presented in chronological order: "Hardship, Ideas, and Inspiration," "The Change and Uncovering a Moment," and "Reliving the Experience One Year Later: A Collaboration Session Reveals the Extraordinary in the Everyday." Reflective analytical discussion follows each narrative.

### **First Episode: Hardship, Ideas, and Inspiration**

One school day, I came up the stairs and turned the corner to witness Marsha standing in the hallway. She appeared to be under pressure; her usual kind expression was missing and, in its place, was a visibly concerned and tired teacher's face. Marsha had been struggling to connect

with her co-teacher, who did not seem to share her views on teaching. She also encountered some challenging situations with parents (more fully described in the introduction) who questioned what curricula she and her co-teacher were offering, who felt concerned that children were not treating each other respectfully in the classroom, or who pressed for more opportunities for parent co-participation. I asked her how she was handling these parent and co-worker "issues." Her response seemed to reflect a malaise and lack of interest in continuing to struggle, winded, in an uphill run.

I had just returned from a professional development seminar in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, where Carla Rinaldi of Reggio Emilia spoke about possible futures for schools and shared a striking vision for the rights of children, teachers, and parents. I could see a similar vision playing out in the St. Louis-Reggio Collaborative schools, where educators have studied with Reggio Emilia educators such as Rinaldi for many years. As I stood with Marsha, my mind instantly latched onto some ideas from the many journal entries that I had made during visits to the three St. Louis-Reggio Collaborative schools. I quickly pulled out my journal and shared with her what I had witnessed in St. Louis.

I was not tentative with Marsha at all. I felt as if I could demonstrate enthusiasm and pull her out of this place of pressure, worry, or whatever was "daunting her spirits." We had always connected in the way à Beckett (2007) discusses as the "in-between" (p. vii): "While these situations do involve care and encounter they also involve a greater openness created through a form of unknowing and through presence and mutuality through love. These extensions to ideas of care and encounter help us find the new inspiration" (p. 11). Marsha and I seemed to have the openness a' Beckett describes, and it intensified as I looked through my journal for ideas to inspire changes. We hit upon an idea that seemed likely to address at least some of Marsha's concerns.

I suggested, "Let's create an evening gathering with parents and children where they will help us re-create a message center and a 'building studio' area. We can offer them food as well as a place to talk about what we're trying to create with them. You work on the message center, and I'll work on the block building and natural/reused materials space. We'll turn these spaces into places for children, as they suggested in St. Louis."

This idea seemed to make sense to Marsha. We began to imagine ways that parents could easily participate alongside us, taking initiative to change the environments, the energy, and even the practices in their children's classroom spaces. We also wondered if putting energy into this event would "clean out" some of the current energy around parent concerns and children's bickering.

We moved quickly on this inspired idea from my St. Louis experience, not fully anticipating the power this decision would have. Marsha and I created an invitation and encouraged all of the parents from her classroom to come to a gathering and pizza party to change the room design to enhance the curriculum. We asked them to bring anything office related that they could find at home to donate to the new message center that we would create together. We also asked for particular items such as laminate, cardstock, and black felt markers to make labels for storage baskets. I donated storage baskets from a thrift store purchase, and Marsha brought in agates, black stones, seashells, sticks, and other natural materials to add to the block building and natural/reused materials area.

On the evening of the gathering, Marsha found me just as we were about to start and said, "You won't believe this, but the parents who are coming are those who were having such a hard time understanding our classroom and especially the communication and connection challenges we've all had with [co-teacher] Cori. Making the back room into one large motor play area is okay for a while, especially during winter, but they wondered where the other classroom curriculum is "hiding." I've wondered this myself; you know I can't even utter Reggio Emilia's name and the word 'documentation' without seeing rolling eyes from Cori. She has disdain for something she knows

nothing about. I just don't get where she's coming from."

I listened to Marsha and wondered how I could help. I felt upset by Cori's attitude, which we could not understand even when we invited her into dialogue with us. As Marsha described, the intensity of the strained relationship with Cori and her general lack of interest in Marsha's and my Reggio-inspired way of working were palpable. She was invited to this gathering but did not attend.

At the event, parents seemed jovial. The children alternately engaged with and disengaged from the adults' work-at-hand. Parents drew various block shapes and sizes on labels or made drawings of pebbles, and they learned about the "language of drawing" as they expressed their understanding of the various materials that were to be housed in the baskets near the block building area. Other parents and two children set up the message center space with two little tables and office supplies, ranging from sticky notes to staplers. I heard Marsha explain to parents that there were more small baggies of "goodies" on the neighboring table, waiting to be unpacked; several parents who could not come to the party had dropped off materials for the message center and wanted their "tools" added to the new space.

The hum of the work seemed to feel good, even for the four children who didn't want to help rearrange the space. One parent played Twister with them in the back room; we heard laughter and calls of "Red!" or "Blue!" and "Left-hand, right-foot." Marsha and I caught each other's gaze at one point in the evening as if to say, "Ah, we did it!"

## **First Episode Discussion**

Out of the distress of an otherwise highly motivated teacher came inspiration to move forward in new and enlightening directions with the parents. Marsha and I used the clash between her classroom practices and some parents' expectations to propel us toward a new perspective and a new project. It was imperative to consider where this new motivation originated. In this case, my involvement in a professional development experience with the St. Louis-Reggio Collaborative schools provoked us to consider how we could move to action and offer our own community an opportunity to connect and collaborate. Marsha and I were careful not to copy the other schools' ideas too closely; instead, we reinterpreted and reinvented the ideas in our own cultural framework, in line with the needs and values of our school. Although this approach felt daunting in the face of critical questions and possible resistance from some teachers at HG CDC, we decided to proceed with experimenting with our new ideas.

We found that opening the door to new possibilities held power. We saw our idea lead to a group of parents and young children becoming engaged in making changes to the classroom design, dramatically enhancing the environment and curriculum. Another immediate effect was Marsha's joy at finding a way to address some of the weighty issues within her parent community. On the other hand, the experience again highlighted the continuing philosophical disconnection between Marsha and her co-teacher. While we understood how important the invitation to help re-create the classroom spaces and materials was to the children and parents, we did not anticipate the magnitude of reverberation of the effects yet to come.

## **Second Episode: The Change and Uncovering a Moment**

After changing the classroom with the parents and children, Marsha and I noticed immediate results. She told me, "The parents are connecting and saying hello in the morning. And children are engaging in their new places with ease. I hear conversations between them about how their parent brought in such and such. One child shared with us that her mom was drawing the labels for the block baskets and that they would go and laminate them when she was done."



I chuckled and said, "See, I wondered how easy this would be to *include*." I stressed this word "include," and my mind caught a glimpse of trouble as I continued, "I don't think that Cori is on board. I wonder if she'll ever see what we're doing. How can we pull her into our enthusiasm? What about the other teachers who don't want to play along with us?"

A short time later, when I walked into Marsha's classroom, a student teacher informed me that Marsha had gone to lunch already and that Cori was in the back room. As I began to find my bearings amid what was going on in the room, I looked down upon a magnificent children's creation and felt stunned by what I saw (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Floor construction created by Luke and Shannon.*

An amazing construction was layered and sprawled out in front of me, all over the floor, spilling out from the new block building and natural/found materials area that we had created with the families. I couldn't quite understand what it represented. But I felt it was important—intricate and huge, its presence seemed to have been made possible by changing the room's configuration with parents and children. I had seen many child-created constructions around the floor but not of this magnitude and certainly not this aesthetically intriguing to the eye, with its many colors, shapes, and forms making something whole out of many bits and pieces.

I went to Cori and asked, "Did you see what the children have created in the front room? It is simply amazing. Do you mind if I take some photos of it with the children here?" She said very little and did not convey much interest in the work or in my opinion. I recognized that I was not able to read Cori's body language well. I felt nervous about my approach but continued to express enthusiasm about the two children's work as an after-effect of the parents' involvement in re-creating the room. Cori acknowledged the photo-taking idea and left the room quickly. "Maybe she is nervous, too," I thought to myself. "We aren't good at interacting with one another." I visualized a metaphor of two dancing sheets, not touching and arrhythmic.

I grabbed my camera, and the makers of that extraordinary construction momentarily backed away from building so I could take some photos. I thanked them and backed up myself, only to knock over a trifold documentation panel facing the place where the children created their representation. I glanced at some drawings and photos of buildings on it as I set it back in place. Marsha had made this panel a few days earlier with the children, focusing on their studies of walks that they took in the city and using drawings that they had made in the new message center with office supplies donated by parents. She had set up the panel near the new block building and natural/reused materials space. I turned around, took one last photo of the children and their work, and walked out the door to find Marsha, eager to share my happiness at this moment in time.

The two children who made the construction did not tell me much about it, but Marsha reported later how they reacted when my photos of it returned to the classroom as part of a documentation panel. She shared her own reaction to the photograph in Figure 1:

...Luke was such a shy boy. Shannon was too, actually. We had lunch with Shannon, and many families came.... Just lots of families, mostly from Asia...a combination of different Asian countries and about 30 people.... So Shannon came in, and everyone said "Shannon!" and she ran and hid...`cause it freaked her out—she's really shy, you know. And that was too much for her. And Luke came in, very shy. He came from China not speaking any English, and it took him a long while. So just to have [Shannon] do the—I don't know how you can translate that—this proud stance in the photo (Figure 1). ...[A]nd they weren't two kids who played together.... I mean, I wouldn't have guessed that these two would have done it together. So, I just love that stance in the photo.

## Second Episode Discussion

When I entered the classroom and saw the children's massive construction that had taken over the floor, my immediate internal construction of meaning was that of awe, wonder, and surprise. I later told Marsha in our reflective meeting on these events, "I feel stunned" and "I find my bearings where I'm standing," and "I couldn't quite wrap my head around what the children were making, but it felt so intricate, huge, and important in the room." The experience was one of wonder, of "not knowing." As I reflected upon the event, a notion of children as teachers percolated in me: What do children teach the teachers? And, when and how do teachers act as listeners to the big ideas coming forth from children?

My actions as documenter allowed for a cascade of effects. Marsha told me that Shannon and Luke spoke later about the photographs of themselves; she noted that something transformative seemed to have occurred for the two "shy" children who had not previously played together or worked on such large creations.

The desire to share with others and to revisit and reflect on the children's work propelled Marsha and me to capture such moments and retell stories through our documentation. When moments such as this are documented, the story can live on and be reexamined and interpreted, perhaps helping others to construct meaning for similar events that they witness in other contexts. Documenting the experience generates anticipation of more connections to be made.

In the end, we did not construct the full meaning of these experiences until a year later when Marsha and I met with Suzy and Sheryl to share our stories and documentation of the first two episodes presented above. We were aware of a sense of awe, wonder, and surprise, but we did not see the larger connections that we could make of these events until we laid out the documents all together and retold our stories.

## Third Episode: Reliving the Experience One Year Later—A Collaboration Session

About a year after the events described above, Marsha and I set up a collaboration session with Suzy, the studio teacher, and Sheryl, another researcher who wished to capture the discussion in audio recordings and digital photography. We knew that Suzy would understand our process of collaboration and would want to help us articulate and argue our ideas collegially. Marsha and I had printed out my photos of Shannon and Luke and their large floor construction. We also brought the trifold documentation panels from the classroom, including the one I had tripped on when photographing the construction (Figure 2).



*Figure 2 . Talking about documentation panels during a collaboration session.*

We expected to discuss the processes of working with the parents and children to re-create the classroom spaces. Suzy opened the conversation:

*Suzy:* Who put this put together?

*Will:* This [documentation work] looks like Marsha.

*Marsha:* A younger Marsha!

*Will:* You know, this [episode] was one year ago. So we were just starting this [project].

*Suzy:* That's interesting.

...

*Will:* ...[T]he reality is HGC was documenting a lot of stuff, but we were doing it over all this—all this—too much stuff and color, and not enough thinking going into the process. And this [series of episodes] was a turning point. So let me see if I can tell ... some of the story. Let me know if I'm getting it right, Marsha.

*Marsha:* Okay.

*Will:* I remember you explaining the whole thing about the pizza party [our parent invitational evening].... [W]e re-created this whole literacy and message center at that time. And that was the first evening meeting that we had. It was early spring. And then this (pointing to another panel) was the second one. And this (indicating one of the panels) you can see that they [the children] were already working. They put the light table in that area, and we had new drawing pens for them and some of the stuff from that work is on the board.... But what this story launches into, at least what I get from it is—the children and parents come in that night.... [W]e bring them in and re-create this whole area, which is a found objects/unit block area. So we have the message center being set up in the other room, and this room becomes the found objects [place]. From this (indicating photo of Luke and Shannon) though, what I remember is I came up to your classroom, then went screaming down the hall to the rest of the school that the teachers had to see this. Shannon and Luke end up making this [in the] entire found objects/block space. They literally tore this space up and made this [huge aesthetic construction]. Is that right, Marsha?

*Marsha:* Yeah, I came back from my break, and they just made it.

*Will:* We thought the whole school would show up.

During the meeting, Marsha began to reconsider the focus of one of the panels:

*Marsha:* You know what I think ... this one [panel] should be more about parent participation, not participation, I hate that word ... parents, families, teachers, and children as researchers together. This is like the very beginning of our Reggio work.

*Will:* It seems like we have our drawing and the message center that we created, and we have the parent participation piece, which happened in the first panel, and then the outcome of the culminating point is "What did we see children do once children and families had ownership in the space. What did we see the children do with the materials?"

*Marsha:* And even if they [the children] had ownership [before], they just had this little corner here, and none of them were ever asked what they saw....

Sheryl then posed a question that moved us to consider identifying a theme in the content of the panels (Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Discussing the focus of documentation panels.*

*Sheryl:* So can I ask you something? If you were showing all of these panels together, what would you title it? Is there a theme or big idea that you want to try to convey?

*Marsha:* Well, at the beginning, it was working together....

*Will:* You know what I think, it [the theme] is almost, "How do children use materials when families and teachers come together and create intentional spaces?"

*Suzy:* Uhum. I can see that.

*Marsha:* I think it's "creating intentional spaces." Because not only did the parents create the space;... the teachers did it and the children did it, too.... Everyone created intentional spaces their own way. Down to this, it's intentional space. Intentional ... I like that word.

*Suzy:* It's incredible!

*Will:* Isn't it?

*Suzy:* It really is.

*Will:* But it [that theme] doesn't show [in the documentation]. People don't automatically come in and go to the "Oh my gosh, what did you guys do here?" The documentation doesn't make that kind of sense yet.... What I find so fascinating about this documentation is where we have children's graphic language, we don't have their verbal languages ... or their thinking that goes into the verbal pieces. But we do have

their drawings. We have their buildings. We ... do have some of those pieces, those elements we can work with. My only concern is, I would like to see this story with: Here's where we were, and here's what we did. And, Marsha, you chose the word, but "A frustrated teacher finds her..." And maybe frustrated is not the word. I don't know what it is, but you were, you were [waving hand at Marsha to suggest she choose the word]....

*Marsha:* I wanted more! I wanted more!

*Will:* I don't know if you were depressed, but you were upset.

*Marsha:* (Laughs ... somewhat agreeing).

I recapped the events of the first narrative episode, which had propelled us toward the collaborative reorganizing, a new form of parental involvement in Marsha's classroom.

*Will:* ...I remember meeting in the hallway, and here's what you were upset about, I know. There were other things going on previously that we won't go into today.... When I caught you in the hallway and you were upset and it's the only time I ever heard you questioning whether you wanted to do this anymore.

*Marsha:* Uhum.

*Will:* ...I was like, really taken back. And I said, "Let's rethink this." I had just been to St. Louis, and there was a lot of energy out there, and all I did was tell you about what they did in their kindergarten classroom, and I think I even had my little booklet where I read from it to you, like the quotes from their school and their documentations.... [I]t's almost like a teacher's journey, learning from another school how to bring parents in ... in a new way.

*Marsha:* Uhum.

*Will:* And that's exactly what you did. You jumped on that and said, "Let's do it!"

*Marsha:* Right, and I think that's the main point. In spite of all of this (points to pictures of children's construction), it's not about the *cool area*.

*Will:* No, but my thing is that it does lead itself ... to, "Oh my gosh, look at what those kids are doing now!?"

*Marsha:* Uh, huh. And that can over-ride difficult situations. I don't remember my feelings in the same way you do. But I remember this parent that had just been unhappy for two years and ... this other one whose child said all this stuff and after that she denied saying it. It was this huge, mixed up—and you know. This challenge to include parents was actually a diversion from that.... It was amazing....

*Marsha:* ...'Cause dealing with [the dread] was easier than living with it. I was ready to change the classroom spirit toward collaboration.

As the conversation was coming to a close, we discovered a correlation between two examples of the children's work (shown in Figure 1 and Figure 4). One of the trifold documentation panels that Marsha and I had brought to our conversation with Suzy and Sheryl included drawings of the city buildings that children had made in the new message center. This was the panel that had been sitting on the floor next to the construction that Luke and Shannon made in the middle of the room, the panel I knocked over as I backed up to take the photo. We suddenly saw a likely connection between those drawings and that construction.

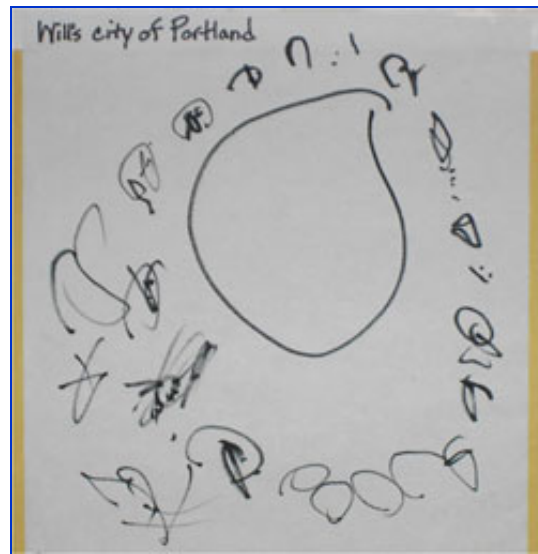


Figure 4. A child's drawing of the city of Portland.

It seemed to us that Luke and Shannon had probably reconstructed the city based on drawings of the city (such as the one in Figure 4) displayed on the panel that Marsha had set next to the block building area.

### Episode Three Discussion

This collaboration session and dialogue suggested that it is possible to walk back through memories of events to find shared meaning and that intentional documentation can help us do that. As Marsha reminded me, "I don't remember my feelings in the same way you do. But I remember..." Our differing recollections construct a new understanding of the experiences behind us. As we reach back to make sense, we can grow forward as well. Marsha and I had little difficulty narrating our phenomenon, though we experienced more complexity refraining from "beautifying our account with fancy phrases" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 67) because we were quite moved by our experiences and the meanings we draw from them through the research processes of reflection and narration.

Living in ongoing stressful situations is not easy. Marsha was fortunate to have an opportunity to change the classroom dynamics to ease her own stress and that of the children and parents. She and I both remembered our conversation about how to change those dynamics, with suggestions that were inspired by my professional development experience with the St. Louis Reggio Collaborative. We both recalled that she was open to solutions; as she said, "Dealing with it [the dread] was easier than living with it."

Another important element of this dialogue was the contrast between the stress-inducing experiences that Marsha faced in her classroom and positive moments in which we were caught up in admiring children's work that apparently was made possible by the collaborative changes to the classroom: "Oh my gosh, look at what those kids are doing now!" How opportunity can arise out of crisis becomes a possible question for further research.

This third narrative episode also demonstrates that teaching is not a solo act. In this case, collaboration and professional development led to some revelations for Marsha and for me, helping us toward new understandings and new ideas and actions. Before the meeting with Suzy and Sheryl, we had not recognized that children were using connections between the block building area and the message center, the two places that parents, children, and teachers had created together. That understanding became our epiphany.

### A Final Theme Emerges



As Marsha and I, with our two colleagues, concluded our retelling discussion and analysis of the three narrative episodes, a major theme was revealed related to our question of what meaning can be found in these particular experiences of classroom collaboration involving parents, a teacher, a co-director, and young children. Rinaldi (2006) asserts that *to listen is to be in crisis*. Marsha and I and our colleagues found this idea playing out in our narratives. In the end, we believe with Harvey (2008), that "If you are listening, if you are awake to the poignant beauty of the world, your heart breaks regularly. It is made to break open again and again so it can hold more wondrous things" (section 2, paragraph 3). Through our listening and collaboration, we found another aspect of the extraordinary in the everyday.

Marsha and I saw during our phenomenological study how inspiration grew out of her hardship, sparked by a professional development opportunity in which I had listened as other teachers shared their stories of successful experiences. Listening to the parents, to the children, to colleagues, and to voices advocating innovative practices led to new ideas for collaboratively creating intentional spaces in Marsha's classroom and increased Marsha's and my resilience as educators.

I subsequently documented a critical moment in two children's work that apparently came about as a result of having the new classroom spaces. This documentation itself had a cascade of effects, which we discovered later, during the final narrative episode when we met with Suzy and Sheryl to collaboratively rediscover the two episodes from the previous year. The collaboration during this episode led us to new insights about listening to each other, the children, the parents, and co-workers, and it fostered more enthusiasm for documenting and retelling the stories of our experiences as educators.

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## Author Information

Will Parnell, Ed.D., is an assistant professor in curriculum and instruction and early childhood education at Portland State University. He also serves as the pedagogical director of the [early childhood schools](#) on his campus. Will coordinates the master's specialization in early childhood education for the Graduate School of Education's Curriculum and Instruction Department. He researches the experiences of teachers and children in schools, and his specialty areas are environments and designs for learning and teaching, equity and culture in early education, documenting young children's learning, and facilitating narratives. Dr. Parnell currently serves on the founder's board of [A Renaissance School of Arts and Sciences](#) and on the [RECE](#) program committee, he leads the [Remida Portland](#) initiative, and he is a school board member at [The Emerson School](#).

Will Parnell, Ed.D.  
Graduate School of Education Curriculum and Instruction Department  
Portland State University  
P.O. Box 751  
Portland, OR 97207  
Email: [parnellw@pdx.edu](mailto:parnellw@pdx.edu)